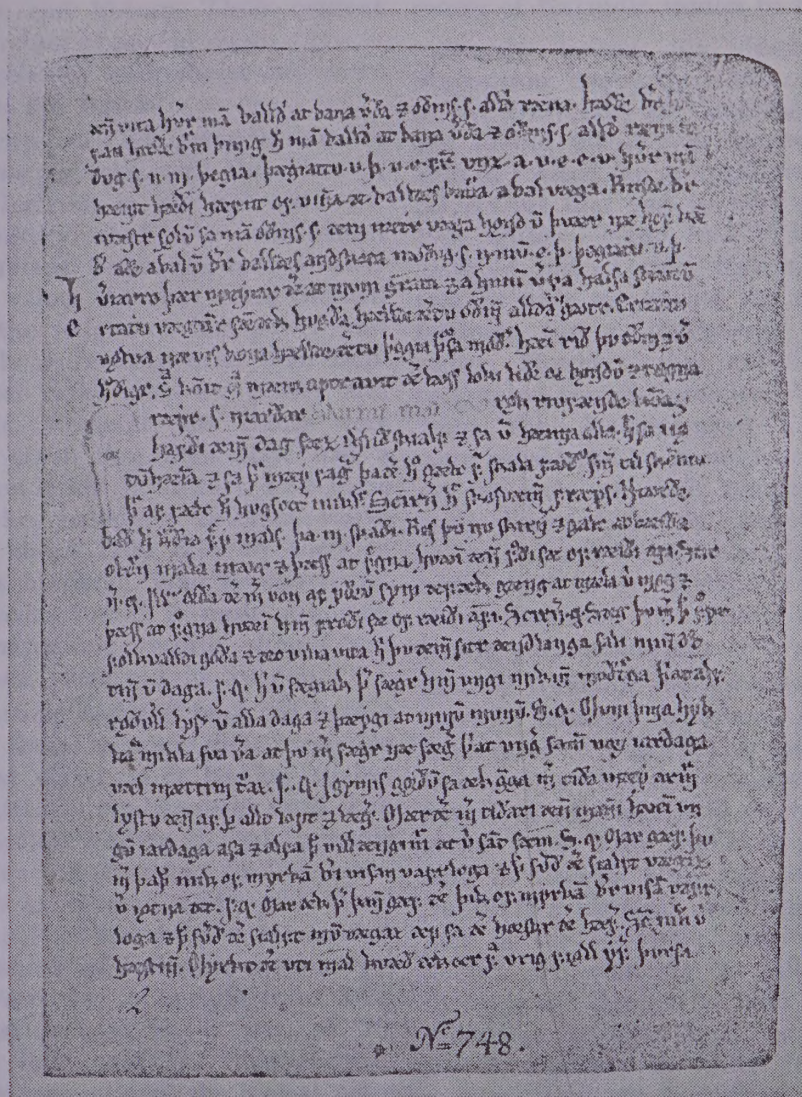


## Iceland To Receive Old Manuscripts From Denmark



A page from the Codex Regius of Sæmundar Edda

It is believed that the Icelanders began to write in the vernacular about 1100 A.D. During the next centuries numerous valuable books or manuscripts were produced in Iceland. Some

of these manuscripts have been preserved in their original form; other manuscripts existing today are copies of ancient originals.

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Iceland. Manuscripts]





The Old Icelanders appear to have taken little interest in the visual arts. Instead they found artistic expression in words and books; these books represent an important cultural heritage and Iceland's contribution to Medieval literature and history. Their content is the product of an old civilization on which Icelandic nationhood and independence are based.

For centuries Old Icelandic historic and literary works were little known outside Iceland. It was not until the 17th century that the continental Scandinavians began to realize their historic value. At that time Sweden was at the height of her power and politically more influential than Denmark, her chief rival for power and influence. However, the Danes were able to claim that their state had a firm foundation in history, and these claims they based on historical works written about 1200 A.D. by their illustrious historian Saxo Grammaticus. The Swedes found it most annoying that comparable records should not have been preserved in Sweden.

The strong desire of both the Swedes and the Danes to prove their respective historical rights as a leading nation in Scandinavia explains why both took an immediate interest in Old Icelandic books on Scandinavian history when such books became known to them. As a result of that interest a considerable number of Icelandic manuscripts found their way to Swedish collections. However, Iceland was a part of the Danish state and therefore Copenhagen was considered the logical place for most of her ancient books.

As is well known the Iclander Árni Magnússon (1663-1730) was an exceedingly active and successful collector of Icelandic Manuscripts. These manuscripts he later deposited in the famous Arnarnaganean Collection at the

University of Copenhagen (the Collection was named for Árni Magnússon himself). A considerable portion of the Arnarnaganean Collection perished in a fire in 1728. In spite of that loss the collection has remained an important centre of Icelandic studies to this day.

Shortly before his death, Árni Magnússon bequeathed his collection to the University of Copenhagen. No one should blame him for being unable to foresee the cultural and political revival that was to take place in 19th century Iceland. In 1730 it seemed unlikely indeed that Iceland would ever be able to provide the necessary facilities for a manuscript research centre. However, the possibilities of reclaiming certain historical documents from the Arnarnaganean Collection were considered by prominent Icelanders as early as 1837. Similar claims were discussed shortly after the turn of the century. Nevertheless, it was not until 1930 when Iceland celebrated the millennium of Alþing that Icelandic parliamentarians first suggested that all Icelandic manuscripts in Denmark be returned to Iceland. After Iceland received full independence from Denmark in 1944 these claims were renewed at meetings held by representatives from both Denmark and Iceland in 1945-46. Only two years later (in 1947) a vigorous campaign in support of the Icelandic cause was conducted by students in 49 schools throughout Denmark. The students submitted "an open letter" to the Danish Government in which it was requested "that the Icelanders be given back their treasures". This campaign did much to create a public opinion in Denmark in favour of the Icelandic cause. It appears to have convinced many that in this particular instance "cultural rights" should prevail over "legal rights".





On April 27, 1961 the Danish Parliament passed an Act authorizing the Danish Government to transfer Icelandic manuscripts from the Arnarnaganean Collection to the University of Iceland. However, opponents of this legislation managed to have its enactment postponed by claiming that the new law involved an act of expropriation. On the 19th of May in 1965, after the theory of expropriation from 1961 had been proven invalid, the Manuscript Act was passed for the second time by the Danish Parliament. Members of the Arnarnaganean Executive Council who were strongly opposed to the idea of returning the manuscripts to Iceland appealed their case to the Danish Courts of Justice. The validity of the Manuscript Act was first ratified by a District Court, and finally on the 17th of November, 1966 the Supreme Court of Denmark ruled that the Icelandic manuscripts in the Arnarnaganean Collection should be handed over to the University of Iceland. The ruling of the Supreme Court resolved a complicated argument. This argument concerned both Iceland and Denmark. However, it is important to remember that the Icelanders were not directly involved in the dispute. The question of returning the Old Icelandic manuscripts to their homeland became a court case after the Arnarnaganean Executive Council had gone so far as to question the rights of the Danish government to follow the instructions of the Danish Parliament.

Even though the political rights of the "manuscript dispute" has now been disposed of, much remains to be done before the plans of the actual transfer of the manuscripts can be finalized. The Manuscript Act specifies that the Icelanders will receive what may be regarded as their own cultural

possessions. It is pointed out that such cultural possessions comprise the following:

- 1( All originals or copies of original documents concerning Iceland, and other items which may be regarded as ancient holdings of Icelandic private or public collections.

- 2( Works that were definitely composed or translated by Icelanders, i.e., if such works either deal with Icelandic matters or belong to the late Medieval literature. (These items are loosely translated here).

The Act further states that in addition to manuscripts from the Arnarnaganean Collection the Icelanders will also receive the two highly valued treasures of the Royal Library in Copenhagen, i.e., *Flateyjarbók* (which contains among many other things the Saga of the Greenlanders which is the oldest account of the Icelandic discovery of this continent), and *Codex Regius* (The Royal Book) of *Sæmundar Edda*.

Finally, the Act states that criteria determining Icelandic and non-Icelandic cultural possessions will be applied by a committee of four specialists—two from the University of Copenhagen and two from the University of Iceland.

Although the committee of Danish and Icelandic scholars has a most difficult task to perform, all Icelanders have ample reason to be grateful for the conclusion which Danish authorities have now arrived at on the issue in question. The political solution of the "manuscript dispute" is an important milestone in the history of Icelandic independence; it is also our opinion that it augurs well for the future of that independence.

—H. B.





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